

THE DEFLATIONARY METAONTOLOGY OF THOMASSON'S *ORDINARY OBJECTS*

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“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.”
(Lewis Carroll, *The Walrus and the Carpenter*)

In *Ordinary Objects*,¹ Thomasson pursues an integrated conception of ontology and metaontology. In ontology, she defends the existence of shoes, ships, and other ordinary objects. In metaontology, she defends a deflationary view of ontological inquiry, designed to suck the air out of arguments against ordinary objects. The result is an elegant and insightful defense of a common sense worldview.

I am sympathetic—in spirit if not always in letter—with Thomasson’s ontology. But I am skeptical of her deflationary metaontology. Indeed, I think that her metaontology and her ontology are in tension. Her metaontology dismisses certain ontological questions as *unanswerable*, but her ontology in fact answers these very questions. For example, Thomasson dismisses the special composition question on its intended interpretation as “unanswerable” (p. 136), but she goes on to defend the standard answer of the universalist (p. 184). Thus, my primary argument will be that Thomasson should reject deflationary metaontology, by her own lights.

Thomasson’s main line of argument—as I understand it—runs as follows. First, she argues from the need for sortals in reference determination to the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms. In particular, she argues that it is analytic that if there are particles arranged cupwise, then there is a cup. Second, she argues from the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms to the existence of ordinary objects. Since all sides agree that there are particles arranged cupwise, all sides are committed to cups. Third, she argues from the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms to the unanswerability of certain ontological questions. This deflationary metaontology is then used to further buttress the claim that ordinary objects exist. See Figure 1 for a flowchart.

There are certainly other positions defended in *Ordinary Objects*, and other connections between the four positions diagrammed. Indeed Thomasson may well regard the four positions diagrammed as all being interconnected. But this flowchart will set my agenda.

1. A. Thomasson, *Ordinary Objects* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

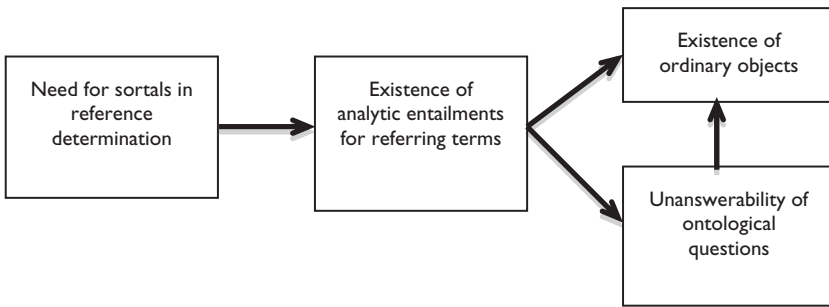


Figure 1: Thomasson’s Main Line of Argument.

Agenda: In the first section, I will discuss the argument from the need for sortals in reference determination to the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms. In the second section, I will discuss the argument from the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms to the existence of ordinary objects. In the third section, I will consider the argument from the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms to the unanswerability of ontological questions, and conclude that Thomasson should by her own lights reject this line of thought. Finally, in the fourth section, I will articulate an alternative metaontology that I think better fits Thomasson’s ordinary ontology.

1. From Reference Determination to Analytic Entailments

Suppose that Art has just pointed in the direction of a cup, and said “I hereby dub thee ‘Grail.’” If all went well, he will have rendered the term “Grail” fit to refer to that cup. But how did he do it? In the direction he pointed lies not just that cup, but also its facing surface, its location, its constituting matter, and various surrounding clouds of air molecules. So how did Art manage to render “Grail” fit to refer to that cup, rather than any of the many other candidate referents in the direction he pointed?

Or suppose that Lance has been suffering a mere hallucination of a cup and has pointed in the direction he imagined a cup to be, and said “I hereby dub thee ‘Grail.’” In this case, things have gone badly and Lance’s term “Grail” should fail to refer. But why in this case does not “Grail” come to refer to a location, or to some cloud of air molecules?

In general, for any referring term, how is its referent fixed? Call this *the qua problem*. Thomasson offers a plausible solution. Her solution is that reference is fixed (to the extent that it is fixed) by the intentions of the reference fixer, to refer to an entity of an intended *sort*. For instance, in introducing “Grail,” both Art and Lance might have intended to refer to *a cup*. Such an intention enables “Grail” to refer to a cup in the good case, and disables “Grail” from referring to a location in the bad case. Call this *the sortal solution*. As Thomasson summarizes:

[A]rguments from the *qua* problem suggest that reference to individuals (whether via singular or sortal terms) is determinate *only to the extent that* the term is associated with determinate application conditions and coapplication conditions, via association—at a minimum—with a certain sort or category of entity to be referred to. (p. 42)

So far, so good. Thomasson then argues that the sortal solution entails the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms. In particular, the sortal is supposed to come with *application and coapplication conditions* that determine (respectively) under what conditions the attempted baptism would succeed, and under what conditions the term involved would remain applicable. These conditions are then supposed to imbue the referring term with a conceptual content, and this conceptual content is supposed to generate analytic entailments to the existence of ordinary objects. (For instance, if the presence of particles arranged cupwise is a condition under which “Grail” would successfully refer, then “Grail” is supposed to have conceptual content that generates an analytic entailment from the presence of particles arranged cupwise to the existence of Grail: second section). Thus, Thomasson claims:

If, to avoid the difficulties of the *qua* problem, we accept that our singular and sortal terms come with at least this sort of minimal conceptual content, we have the basis we need to ground the kind of analytic entailments I rely on in diagnosing problems with various arguments against ordinary objects. (p. 44)

But I do not think that the sortal solution—plausible as it is—entails the existence of any such conceptual contents, or any such analytic entailments. To see this, it might help to consider the causal theory of reference, understood as playing a role in reference determination. The causal theory, so understood, constrains a token referring term to refer (if it does refer) to an entity (if there is any) at the origin of the causal process that produced the token. So one might think that the causal theory of reference entails the existence of conceptual content and analytic entailments, from referring terms to causal processes.

But as Kaplan (pp. 573–4²; cf. Stalnaker, p. 192³) notes, the causal theory of reference may be understood in two quite different ways. On the one hand, it may be understood *as part of the semantics*. In this case, the semantic values of referring terms will involve descriptions of causal processes. As a result, “the entity at the other end of the historical chain that produced the previous token of ‘Grail’ is here” may analytically entail “Grail is here.” But on the other hand, the causal theory of reference may be understood *as metasemantics*, merely playing a role in explaining why a given term has the referent it does.⁴ One can

2. D. Kaplan, “Afterthoughts,” in J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, (Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 565–614.
3. R. Stalnaker, *Ways a World Might Be* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
4. Thus, Kaplan speaks of “the crucial question” concerning the causal theory of reference: “[D]oes the theory state a semantic value of proper names, or does it rather tell us the basis for determining a semantic value for proper names. Those who believe that a name *means* some-

then preserve a directly referential semantics, without any descriptive content. For example, the semantic value of “Grail” may simply be that cup. The metasemantic explanation of why “Grail” has that cup as a semantic value may then advert to the causal facts, but the causal facts will not show up in the semantics proper, and hence, not generate any substantive analytic entailments. Thus, one can endorse causal constraints on reference determination without substantive analytic entailments to causal processes, by regarding the causal theory as part of the metasemantics.

Exactly the same issues arise with respect to Thomasson’s sortal solution to the qua problem. The sortal solution may be understood as part of the semantics, in which case the sortal will be part of the semantic value of a referring term. Such semantic values will indeed generate analytic entailments. But the sortal solution may also be understood as metasemantics. In that case, the semantic values of referring terms may simply be their referents, as on a directly referential semantics. No substantive analytic entailments will be generated. Thus, Thomasson’s sortal solution to the qua problem does not require “conceptual content associated with our terms” (p. 45), unless further argument is given for preferring the semantic interpretation of the sortal solution.

Following Kaplan, I would take the metasemantical interpretation to be orthodoxy. But I do not mean to insist on orthodoxy. I only mean to invite Thomasson to provide some reasons (if such there be) for preferring the semantical interpretation. Pending such reasons, I must conclude that Thomasson’s first line of reasoning needs further support.

2. From Analytic Entailments to Ordinary Objects

Waiving the concerns of the previous section, let us grant that referring terms indeed bear analytic entailments. Would this establish the existence of ordinary objects? Much depends on what the analytic entailments are. For example, if “there are particles arranged cupwise” analytically entails “Grail exists,” then even the mereological nihilist (of the sort who accepts that there are particles arranged cupwise) would be forced to grant the existence of Grail.⁵ But if the relevant analytic entailment only went from the presence of *the fusion* of particles arranged cupwise, then the mereological nihilist (who does not accept the

thing like *the individual who lies at the other end of the historical chain that brought this token to me* will regard the historical chain theory as a part of semantics, as *giving* the meaning rather than telling us how to discover it” (Kaplan: 574). Kaplan himself opts for the metasemantical view, in keeping with his directly referential semantics.

5. Nihilist views in this vicinity are defended by P. Van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Cornell University Press, 1990); T. Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Clarendon Press, 2001); and G. Rosen and C. Dorr, “Composition as a Fiction,” in R. Gale (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics* (Basil Blackwell, 2002), pp. 151–74. For a different form of nihilism, based on the existence monist view that only the whole world exists, see T. Horgan and P. Matjaž, *Austere Realism: Contextual Semantics Meets Minimal Ontology* (MIT Press, 2007); and J. Schaffer, “From Nihilism to Monism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 85 (2007), pp. 175–91. In the main text, I will work with the particle-based version of nihilism, but the points should generalize.

existence of fusions) would not be forced to grant the existence of Grail. So why think that the analytic entailments run from particle arrangements, rather than from fusions of particles?

Generalizing, let *the accepted description* of a given situation be the description that a given opponent of ordinary objects would accept (and that the friend of ordinary objects would accept as well). For instance, the nihilist would presumably accept a description in terms of particle arrangements. Let *the disputed description* of that situation be the description that the opponent of ordinary objects would deny (but that the friend of ordinary objects would also accept). For instance, the nihilist would deny a description that countenanced any fusions of particles. Why in general think that the analytic entailments run from the accepted description, rather than from the disputed description?

Thomasson has a reply, which invokes her sortal solution to the qua problem and points forward to her deflationary metaontology. Her reply is that the disputed description is semantically defective. She begins by noting that the disputed description inevitably involves explicit or implicit reference to the ontologist's notion of "thing" (or "entity"):

All hopes for reviving the debate between eliminativists and common sense realists about ordinary objects, then, rely on the idea that there is some neutral use of 'thing' on which the eliminativist may deny, and the realist affirm, that there is some *thing* composed by the properly arranged particles. (p. 158)

She then invokes her sortal solution to the qua problem, to argue that the ontologist's sense of "thing" cannot have determinate reference. Since "thing" in the ontologist's sense is supposed to be a referring term, its reference is fixed (to the extent that it is fixed) by the intentions of the reference fixer, to refer to an entity of an intended sort. Yet "thing" in the ontologist's sense is said to be sort neutral, and so it cannot have any determinate reference (pp. 112–115). Thus, the disputed description is ruled out and a deflationary approach to disputes involving the ontologist's sense of "thing" is rung in.⁶

I will argue below (section 3.3) that the ontologist's sense of "thing" is perfectly legitimate (even by Thomasson's own lights). But for now I would just note the role that Thomasson's deflationary approach is playing. If one thinks that there is a legitimate ontological use of "thing," then analytic entailments would not establish the existence of ordinary objects, unless additional reason was given for thinking that the analytic entailments ran from the accepted description (particles), rather than from the disputed description (fusions of particles).

6. The phrase "the ontologist's sense of 'thing'" is mine. Thomasson speaks of the ontologist as working with a *neutral sense* on which "thing" is not treated as a sortal. But I will argue below (section 3.3) that this may not be the best characterization of the ontologist's sense. So in the interim, I will use "the ontologist's sense of 'thing'" to refer to *whatever the ontologist means*, without yet trying to explicate what exactly that is.

3. From Analytic Entailments to Unanswerable Questions

Waiving all previous concerns, let us grant that referring terms indeed bear analytic entailments and that these analytic entailments indeed establish the existence of ordinary objects. So we have a defense of common sense ontology. What follows for metaontology? Thomasson's concluding view is that ontological questions about what exists are unanswerable pseudoquestions. More precisely, Thomasson's view is that some questions about what exists are answerable on purely analytic and/or empirical grounds, but that the remaining questions about what exists are pseudoquestions, analogous to "How long is a piece of string?" and "Do Dell computers help you get more out of now?" (p. 113).

In particular, Thomasson claims radically deflationary consequences for ontological questions or statements involving (i) identity claims, (ii) existence claims, and (iii) the ontologist's sense of "thing." I will now discuss these three issues in turn.

3.1 Identity Claims

Starting with identity claims, let me first clarify the radically deflationary consequences Thomasson claims, as this is a point on which the reader might well get confused. In some places, Thomasson seems to hold the radical view that identity statements do not have the simple form " $a = b$," but rather have some sort of Geach-style sortal relative form such as " a is the same F as b ." Thus, she says:

[I]identity claims are only well formed and truth-evaluable if the terms flanking the identity statement are associated with a certain category of entity each is to refer to, which disambiguates the reference of each term and the criteria of identity applicable to each. (p. 57)

But—as other passages indicate, and as Thomasson (*personal communication*) has clarified—she does endorse the simple form " $a = b$." Her considered view is that simple identity claims require determinately referring terms in order to be truth-evaluable (so it is not well formedness but only truth evaluability that is at issue). The radically deflationary consequence is supposed to be just this: certain simple identity claims crucial to certain ontological disputes are not truth evaluable.

That clarified, I do not understand why determinate reference is required for truth evaluability. First, there can be determinately true identity claims despite indeterminate reference of the terms flanking the identity sign. These will be identity claims true under all admissible interpretations of the flanking terms. For instance, suppose that the term "Grail" lacks determinate reference, for whatever reason (perhaps it was not associated with a sortal when introduced). Also suppose—to avoid irrelevant complications—that there have been no previous baptisms using that name, or that we index names ("Grail₁₇") to avoid ambiguity. Then the following should still be determinately true: Grail = Grail.

Second, there can be determinately false identity claims despite indeterminate reference. These will be identity claims false under all admissible interpretations of the flanking terms. Recall that the indeterminacy potentially associated with “Grail” concerns other potential referents in the general vicinity of the cup, including the cup’s facing surface, its location, its constituting matter, and various surrounding clouds of air molecules. But presumably there are also things that are not in the general vicinity of the cup. Let us suppose that I was nowhere near the scene of the naming. Then I am not even a candidate referent for “Grail.” As such, the following should still be determinately false: Grail = Schaffer.

Third and finally, there will be identity claims that are indeterminate in truth value, in the sense of being true on some admissible interpretations, and false on others. Let “Lumpail” name the lump of clay that constitutes the cup, and let Lumpail be one of the many candidate referents for “Grail.” Then the following should be indeterminate: Grail = Lumpail.

Thus, it seems to me that simple identity claims do *not* require determinately referring terms, in order to be truth-evaluable. Leave identity claims aside for the moment. I assume that in general there is semantic indeterminacy.⁷ So one will need some general treatment of semantic indeterminacy. And so one should simply *apply* one’s general treatment of semantic indeterminacy to the case of identity claims in which one or more of the terms flanking the identity sign lacks determinate reference. If the account of semantic indeterminacy is viable, everything should work out perfectly. (In the paragraphs above, I have been implicitly applying a kind of supervaluationist account.) So I certainly would agree that there is a general problem of semantic indeterminacy, but I see no specific problem for identity claims.

Perhaps Thomasson’s concern is to make sure that there will not be *any* indeterminately truth-valued identity claims? But Thomasson clearly is not demanding perfect referential determinacy, down to the last particle.⁸ She merely intends to narrow referential indeterminacy down to a tolerable range. In particular, she merely intends to ensure sufficient determinacy to match our intuitions about what refers to what and to allow for the prospect of reference failure if there is no matter in that vicinity at all but just a holographic projection. So she too must deal with identity claims involving referentially indeterminate terms.

7. Though this is a controversial matter. See T. Williamson, *Vagueness* (Routledge, 1994) for arguments that there is no semantic indeterminacy, but merely epistemic ignorance of semantic value. That said, on the Williamsonian view our use of terms such as “Grail” will fix a perfectly determinate referent—it is just that we might be unable to know what exactly the referent is. There can be no problem about the meaningfulness of identity claims. At most there might be an epistemic problem for knowing whether a given identity claim holds.
8. After all, suppose I intend “Sumail” to name the mereological sum of particles arranged cupwise. As P. Unger, “The Problem of the Many,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5 (1980), pp. 411–67 and D. Lewis, “Many, but Almost One,” in *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 164–82 have pointed out, there are many decent candidates to be the referent of “Sumail,” differing over whether various outlying particles are parts. No further sortal I could invoke will be selective enough to rule out all but one referent for “Sumail.”

Perhaps Thomasson's concern is rather that certain identity claims—presumably those crucial to certain ontological debates—get evaluated as indeterminate rather than true or false. That is not a problem with truth evaluability. It just may not be the truth value the metaphysician had hoped for. But it seems that all the metaphysician needs to do, if she finds herself in an identity debate with indeterminate terms, is simply to precisify the intended interpretation. Then she can continue her debate.

Overall, it seems to me that Thomasson's considered views on both the syntax and semantics of identity proper are *completely orthodox*. As such, her views cannot have radical implications for metaphysical disputes that turn on identity claims. Thus, consider the debate over whether the statue is identical to the lump of matter constituting it. Given that the term "Goliath" names the statue and that the term "Lumpl" names the lump, then on Thomasson's own view there is a legitimate question as to whether Goliath = Lumpl or not. There could well be substantive debate here.

Telling, Thomasson herself is no deflationist about this debate. She is a full-blown participant. Indeed, she explicitly defends the substantive and controversial doctrine that Goliath is *not* identical to Lumpl (ch. 4).

So I would like to conclude by inviting Thomasson to address the following question: "Are you completely orthodox in your view on the syntax and semantics of identity, or not? If *no*, then what exact aspect of the syntax or semantics would you revise? If *yes*, then how do you claim any radical consequences for identity debates?"

3.2 Existence Claims

Thomasson also claims that her view on reference determination has radical consequences for existence claims. I think the same question arises here as it does with her treatment of identity claims as to whether or not she intends to follow orthodoxy. In some places, Thomasson seems to hold the radical view that existence claims do not have the simple form " $(\exists x)\Phi$," but rather have some sort of sortal relative form such as " $(\exists x: F)\Phi$." Thus, Thomasson approvingly notes the following idea described (but not endorsed) by Sider: "the fundamental quantificational notion is a[n] . . . amalgam of quantification and predication: 'there is an F such that . . .,' where F must be replaced by a sortal" (p. 217; cf. Sider, p. 419⁹). But again—as other passages indicate, and as Thomasson (*personal communication*) has assured me was intended—her considered view is conservative. She allows simple quantification. She would keep the simple syntax and the semantics of the existential quantifier exactly as per usual. So I ask, how could her view possibly have any radical implications for metaphysical disputes that turn on existential quantification, if the syntax and semantics of simple existential quantification are left intact?

9. T. Sider, "Ontological Realism," in D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (eds.), *Meta-metaphysics*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 384–423.

Thomasson has an answer to this question. She claims that she can retain the orthodox syntax and semantics of the existential quantifier, while holding that her view on reference determination impacts *the specification of the domain of quantification*. Thus, she says: “If they are to be meaningful, such quantified statements must likewise presuppose implicit or explicit reference to a certain category or categories of entity in a domain . . .” (p. 115). And she is more explicit about this matter in a later paper (“Answerable and Unanswerable Questions”), where she says:

[E]xistence questions formulated quantificationally are complete and truth-evaluable provided a domain is properly specified, where that involves specifying (or at least tacitly presupposing) what sort or sorts of entity we are talking about. (pp. 464–5)¹⁰

Call this *the domain specification move*.

I do not think that the domain specification move helps Thomasson derive radical implications, for three reasons. First, while I agree that there is a need to specify a domain, I do not think that issues of reference determination need arise in that capacity. For one need not specify a domain by referring to its members and one need not specify a domain by invoking an ontological category. One need only specify a property. For instance, when I look into the fridge and say “all the beer is gone,” I presumably intend to specify the domain of things that satisfy the property *being in the refrigerator*. But *being in the refrigerator* is no sortal! Or consider the analogous case of *being in this room*. That is also a perfectly good domain specifier. But it will not do anything to discriminate Grail the cup, from Lumpail the lump of matter, or from various other candidate referents for the term “Grail,” given that all of these candidates are equally in this room.

I am not denying that the sortals Thomasson invokes are perfectly good domain specifiers. They are. For instance, *being a chair* can be used to specify a domain of chairs. What I am denying is that all of the perfectly good domain specifiers are sortals (in any sense relevant to the sortal solution to the qua problem). We can indeed specify a domain without “specifying . . . what sort or sorts of entity we are talking about.” The way domain specification works in formal semantics is that we specify a property. Any property will do. A sortal like *being a chair* will do, but so will a nonsortal property like *being in this room*.

The second reason why I am doubtful of the domain specification move is that I think it is fairly straightforward to specify the total domain (*everything*). There are lots of ways to do so, one for each nondiscriminating property. For instance, *being an F or a non-F*, *being self-identical*, *having a property*, *falling under a*

10. A. Thomasson, “Answerable and Unanswerable Questions,” in D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (eds.), *Meta-metaphysics*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 444–71.

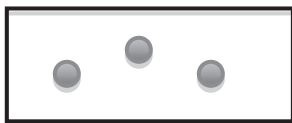


Figure 2: Three Drops of the Water in the Desert.

sortal, and *being an entity* are all nondiscriminating, and all serve equally to specify the most inclusive total domain.¹¹

Thomasson considers the prospect of using “thing” or “object” to get unrestricted quantification, but rejects it on grounds that these terms—as used by the ontologist—“are not category-specifying terms” (p. 113). Here again her denial that there is a meaningful ontological sense of “thing” is playing a crucial role. I will come to this issue in the next subsection (section 3.3). But for now, I would just note that many of the nondiscriminating properties listed above seem on surface not to involve any use of “thing.” Indeed, some seem perfectly legitimate by Thomasson’s own lights. Thus consider *being a chair* or *not being a chair*. She certainly regards *being a chair* as a legitimate domain specifier. Assuming that she is also willing to countenance negation and disjunction as property forming operations, she will recover the property of *being a chair* or *not being a chair*.

The third reason why I am doubtful of the domain specification move is that I think that—even granting everything else—it has no deflationary consequences. For many of the substantive metaphysical questions arise even with a sortally restricted quantifier. For instance, consider the sortal *being a body of water*, and imagine a desert landscape with three scattered pools of water (see Figure 2). (Let us imagine that each of these pools of water is a single indivisible water drop, just to simplify the case.) One can still ask how many bodies of water there are in this desert landscape. The mereological nihilist will say three and the universalist will say seven. And all of this can be said with the simple existential quantifier in a sortally specified domain and with simple identity claims. Metaphysics regained!

Tellingly, Thomasson herself is no deflationist about this debate either. She is a full-blown participant. For—despite earlier claiming that the special composition question is “ill formed and unanswerable” (p. 126)—Thomasson winds up explicitly defending the substantive and controversial doctrine of unrestricted composition (p. 184). For her there is a fact of the matter as to how many bodies of water there are in this desert landscape: seven.

11. There are paradoxes looming if one assumes that the domain is itself *a set*, but one needn’t assume that. In any case I’m going to ignore the paradoxes in the main text, since these issues play no role in Thomasson’s line of argument. For some further discussion of these issues see the papers collected in A. Rayo and G. Uzquiano (eds.), *Absolute Generality* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

3.3 The Ontologist's Sense of "Thing"

Thomasson's rejection of the meaningfulness of the ontologist's notion of "thing" turns out to bear much of the argumentative weight of *Ordinary Objects*. For it is the grounds on which Thomasson holds that the analytic entailments run from particle arrangements (the accepted description), rather than from fusions of particle arrangements (the disputed description), and is thus crucial to her claim that analytic entailments establish the existence of ordinary objects (second section). And it is the grounds on which Thomasson rejects the prospect of specifying the domain of quantification as covering "all things" and is thus crucial to her claim of radically deflationary consequences for ontological debates. So why reject the meaningfulness of the ontologist's sense of "thing"?

I would expect that a significant burden of proof falls on those who would be so uncharitable as to condemn a going discourse as meaningless. But never mind that. For given that Thomasson is a conservative about the existential quantifier and the identity sign, it seems that she admits all the resources needed to characterize what the ontologist means. We only need to say that a is a thing iff $(\exists x) x = a$. So either Thomasson must after all be a radical who denies that the right-hand side is meaningful, or she must admit that it characterizes a meaningful notion which the ontologist might go on to pose questions about. So I think that Thomasson, by her own lights, can and should be more charitable to the ontologist.

That said, Thomasson has an argument against the meaningfulness of the ontologist's notion, which invokes her sortal solution to the qua problem (first section). First, she says that the ontologist's sense of "thing" is what she calls "the neutral sense," which is characterized as a sense that does not involve treating the term as a sortal term (p. 112). Second, she notes that the ontologist's sense of "thing" is supposed to be a referring term. Recall that according to her sortal solution to the qua problem, the referent of any referring term is fixed (to the extent that it is fixed) by the intentions of the reference fixer, to refer to an entity of an intended sort. Since the neutral sense of "thing" is stipulated not to involve an intended sort, Thomasson concludes that the term cannot have any determinate reference (pp. 112–5).

I offer two replies, the first of which is that the ontologist need only stipulate her intended precisification of "thing" (section 3.1). Then her term will acquire determinate reference. And given the resources of existential quantification and the identity sign, the precisification is ready at hand: a is a thing iff $(\exists x) x = a$. It seems that Thomasson is assuming that *only* through association with a sortal can determinate reference arise ("[R]eference to individuals (whether via singular or sortal terms) is determinate *only to the extent that* the term is associated with . . . a certain sort or category of entity to be referred to" [p. 42].) But where is the argument for that? It is one thing to accept that association with a sortal can help determine reference. It is another thing entirely to suppose that there is no other possible way to help determine reference. What exactly is wrong with stipulation?

My second reply to Thomasson's argument that the ontologist's notion of "thing" is meaningless is that I think she may have mischaracterized the

ontologist's notion. Thomasson says that the ontologist is using "thing" in her neutral sense, but I would suggest that the ontologist is using "thing" in what I will call *the highest sortal sense*. On the highest sortal sense, "thing" is used to refer to the highest ontological category of which all other categories are species (the *summmum genus*). So understood, "thing" is associated with the unique category that covers every entity. This is neither Thomasson's neutral nor covering sense, as neither involve association with a sortal at all, nor is it Thomasson's sortal sense, as that is associated with a (contextually determined) subcategory. This is a fourth sense which Thomasson does not consider.

Here are three reasons for thinking that the ontologist is better interpreted as using "thing" in the highest sortal sense, rather than in the neutral sense. First, supposing that Thomasson were right that "thing" in the neutral sense is meaningless, then considerations of charity ought to compel us toward an alternative interpretation. Second, the ontologist is using a term that has the linguistic appearance of a sortal term. As Thomasson notes, "'thing' and 'object' have the superficial grammatical status of count nouns (in virtue of being pluralizable). . . ." (p. 113). So surely the default view ought to be that matters are as they appear, and "thing" is being used to refer to a sortal.

The third reason why I would interpret the ontologist as using "thing" in the highest sortal sense is that the ontologist's sense of "thing" has the inferential profile of the highest sortal. As Thomasson points out, sortals can be arranged in species-genus relations. For instance, *animal* is a genus sortal with respect to *dog*. Thomasson then offers the following general account of when there is a genus sortal:

The application of a sortal S1 to any entity *x* may analytically entail that another sortal, S2, also applies to *x*, as, for example, the application of "dog" to Fido guarantees the application of "animal" to Fido. Where this occurs, I will say that S2 is a "genus-sortal" with respect to S1, and S1 is a "species-sortal" with respect to S2. (p. 41)

Now the ontologist's sense of "thing" is perfectly suited to play the role of genus-sortal with respect to all lower sortals. After all, the application of "dog" or "animal" or any other sortal analytically entails the application of the ontologist's term.

Of course Thomasson may deny that there is any such highest sortal.¹² I can certainly understand how someone who denies that there is a highest sortal may regard ontological questions about it as unanswerable due to presupposition failure. For instance, Aristotle struggles with the question of how there can be a science of being, if there is no unified subject matter (p. 1584).¹³ But

12. Such a denial is famously (and cryptically) issued by Aristotle in "Metaphysics," in J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, (Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 1577. But the orthodox view seems to be that there is a highest genus. As Spinoza puts the matter: "[W]e are accustomed to refer all individuals in nature to one genus, which is called the most general, that is, to the notion of being, which pertains absolutely to all individuals in Nature" (B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley [Penguin Books, 1996], p. 115).
13. Aristotle, pp. 1552–728.

if that is Thomasson's underlying motivation for deflationary metaontology, it is one that does not arise in *Ordinary Objects*. I would regard the matter as highly controversial and requiring sustained argument.

(Indeed, for many of the debates Thomasson is attempting to deflate, the ontologist would only need to use "thing" to refer to a subcategory such as *material object*. So if the underlying issue concerns the denial of a highest sortal, I would also wonder whether the ontologist—in many of the cases at issue—could get by with a slightly more specific sortal. Thomasson would also need to argue that no more specific sortal could save ontological questions.)

Putting these two replies together, it seems that there are at least two consistent and meaningful accounts that can be given of the ontologist's sense of "thing." These are (i) a is a thing iff $(\exists x) x = a$ and (ii) a is a thing iff a falls under the highest sortal. And it seems that the ontologist might secure either of these meanings by stipulation, and might even secure the second of these meanings by fixing reference with an intended sort, exactly as per Thomasson's recipe.

4. Permissivism and the Fundamental

So far I have raised questions about Thomasson's inference from the need for sortals in reference determination to the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms (first section) and I have raised questions about her inference from to the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms to the existence of ordinary objects (second section). I have in addition argued that Thomasson by her own lights should not endorse the inference from the existence of analytic entailments for referring terms to deflationary metaontology since she has at least two consistent and meaningful accounts of the ontologist's sense of "thing" (third section). I would like to conclude by articulating an alternative metaontology that I think better fits Thomasson's ordinary ontology.

The alternative metaontology I have in mind has two main features. First, it is not deflationist about ontological questions of what exists, but rather is *permissivist* about these questions. It grants that ontological questions about what exists are meaningful questions, while adding that the answers to these questions are in a sense trivial, and that the answers—at least in almost all of the contentious cases—are of the form "yes, those things do exist." Second, it recognizes a distinct sort of ontological question that does not concern what exists, but instead concerns what is *fundamental*. And it regards the answers to these questions as deep and interesting. I will now discuss these two features in turn. See Figure 3 for a depiction of the alternative line that I am ultimately recommending for Thomasson.

4.1 Permissivism about Existence Questions

Far from deflating ontological questions about what exists, I think that Thomasson actually provides answers to all the disputed questions she considers, in

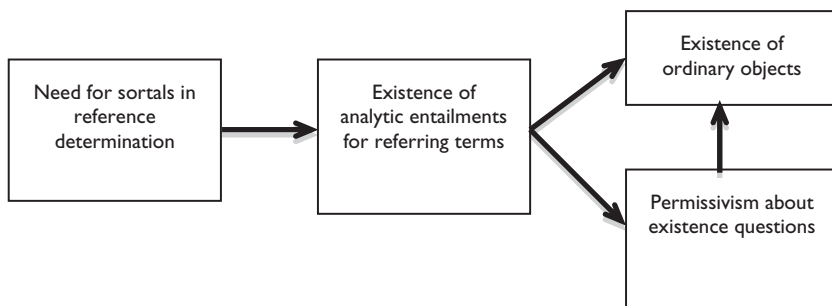


Figure 3: An Alternative Line of Argument.

a characteristic and interesting way. I have already mentioned that Thomasson defends the two-thinger answer to the question of material constitution (section 3.1), and the universalist answer to the question of special composition (section 3.2). I might add that she also recognizes (as candidate referents for terms like “Grail”) “artifacts, lumps of matter, spatial or temporal parts of objects, events, and so on” (p. 38). A pattern is emerging. In every case, Thomasson provides answers to ontological questions about what exists, in a permissive way.¹⁴

So it seems that Thomasson is not in practice a deflationist, but rather is in practice a permissivist. She does not in practice dismiss existence questions as meaningless, but rather treats these questions as meaningful questions that receive somewhat trivial *yes* answers. In particular she holds that these *yes* answers are to be established purely by conceptual analysis plus obvious empirical truths on the basis of analytic entailments.¹⁵ So she can continue to reject the prospect of any substantive metaphysical discoveries that there are no tables and chairs (ch. 11, 466–9; cf. Thomasson¹⁶). In this respect, she may have an unusual route to a permissive metaphysics, but it is a permissive metaphysics all the same.

Indeed, Thomasson’s permissivism is a straightforward consequence of her view of analytic entailments. Recall that the way that she answers the mereological nihilist is to hold that our terms are guaranteed to refer, given the accepted description in terms of particles: “It seems that the world the eliminativist describes [with particles arranged chairwise] *is* one in which there are chairs, according to the application conditions associated with the sortal ‘chair’” (p. 156). But now suppose that instead of working with a term for a

14. Another example: the reader familiar with Thomasson’s earlier work on fiction (A. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* [Cambridge University Press, 1999]) will know that she provides an answer to the question of whether fictional characters exist, and her answer is *yes*.

15. This is the view that D. Chalmers, “Ontological Anti-Realism,” in D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (eds.), *Meta-metaphysics*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 77–129, here 94–9 calls “lightweight realism.” In the main text I am just emphasizing the “realism” aspect of the view.

16. Thomasson (2009): 466–9.

chair or a cup, one instead introduces the term “Eiffelnose,” with the intention to refer to the sum of the Eiffel Tower and one’s nose. By parity of reasoning, for this term to refer all that is required is that there are particles arranged Eiffel-Tower-and-one’s-nose-wise. And this too is an accepted description—even the nihilist will grant that the particles are there. So the very same considerations that Thomasson uses to rebut nihilism are equally considerations that call for the existence of exotica such as arbitrary mereological sums. As Thomasson acknowledges:

[I]f you accept (as I have. . .) that you are committed to Ks as long as you accept the truth of claims that . . . analytically entail the existence of Ks, then you must also accept more than stone, artifacts, and other “common sense” objects. For other sorts of terms *may* be introduced with minimal existence conditions that *are* guaranteed to be met provided that other claims that we accept are true. (p. 172)¹⁷

So Thomasson’s permissivism is not a dispensable extra commitment that she could revoke to preserve her deflationism. Rather her defense of extraordinary objects is a straightforward consequence of her core defense of ordinary objects. So I am suggesting that Thomasson’s account of analytic entailments, far from yielding a deflationary metaontology, is actually in tension with deflationism and instead requires a permissivist approach. I should emphasize that I have no objection to a permissivist approach—indeed I am highly sympathetic (Schaffer, pp. 356–62¹⁸). It is the deflationism that I find to be in tension with Thomasson’s ontology and implausible in its own right. So I am merely offering Thomasson an opportunity to enhance the coherence and plausibility of her package view.

Throwing out ontology to save ordinary objects is not just throwing out the baby with the bathwater. It is throwing away the whole bathtub.

17. It is then a nice question for Thomasson whether she can at this point continue to claim to “make sense of our common sense worldview” (p. 5), given her radically permissive approach to what there is. One might think that, just as it is part of commonsense ontology that tables, pebbles, and apples exist, it is equally part of commonsense ontology that arbitrary mereological sums—such as the fusion of this table, that pebble, and yon apple—do not exist. One might claim that commonsense traffics in cars and not in incars and outcars, where an incar is any segment of a car that is inside a garage, and an outcar is any segment of a car that is outside a garage (E. Hirsch, *The Concept of Identity* [Oxford University Press, 1992]). Of course, it is open to the permissivist to claim that common sense recognizes incars, outcars, and various other arbitrary fusions, but that our normal mode of speaking involves restricted quantifiers (though see D. Korman, “Unrestricted Composition and Restricted Quantification,” *Philosophical Studies*, 140 [2008], pp. 319–34). Thomasson suggests that, with respect to such arbitrary fusions, common sense does not “deny their existence—there are no terms in ordinary English for these things, and common sense understandably does not consider such things at all since, given our range of current practices, such entities would be quite irrelevant and uninteresting” (p. 183). My own view of the matter is that it is acceptable if the ontologist “rounds off” commonsense in this regard, but I will not pursue this issue further.
18. J. Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (eds.), *Meta-metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 347–83.

4.2 What Is Fundamental

I would conclude by noting a second sense in which Thomasson is not a deflationist about ontological inquiry. By my lights, the most interesting ontological question is not the question of what exists, but is rather the question of *what is fundamental*.¹⁹ Metaphysics—as Aristotle said from the start—is about the primary substances which provide the ground of being: “Substance is the subject of our inquiry; for the principles and the causes we are seeking are those of substances. For if the universe is of the nature of a whole, substance is its first part; . . .”²⁰ In Aristotelian terms, the question is *what are the substances?*

Not everything that exists is fundamental. Some entities are grounded in others. For instance, our cup Grail exists, but is presumably not fundamental. If one thinks that particles are fundamental, then one should think that Grail is grounded in its particles. In general, one can ask *whether* a purported entity exists. If the answer is *yes*, then one can ask *how* this entity exists. To answer the *how* question, one needs to know what is fundamental and how the fundamental entities ground the rest.

Thomasson herself acknowledges “a legitimate role for ‘deep’ ontology, the ‘deep’ ontological task of determining what the basic entities are and how they relate to the others. . .” (p. 194). Presumably then she would even allow that there is substantive metaphysics to be done here. It may well be analytic or in some other sense trivial that Grail, Lumpail, Sumail, Eiffelnose, and ever so many other things exist, but it may still be highly nontrivial as to which things are fundamental. If so then not only should Thomasson allow that all ontological existence questions are meaningful, she should even allow that some other ontological questions—the fundamentality questions—are deep and substantive.²¹

19. Schaeffer 2009, pp. 362–5.

20. Aristotle (1984): 1688.

21. Thanks to Matti Eklund, Amie Thomasson, and the audience at the Pacific APA author-meets-critics session on *Ordinary Objects* for helpful discussion.